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journal or publication title	Papers in Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language
volume	18
page range	83-97
year	2008
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1443/00005875/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1443/00005875/</a>

## **A Sociocultural Explanation of the Overuse of Japanese Honorific Utterances in Speech Communication**

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### **要旨**

日本語学習者が敬語を習い始めると、過剰に敬語表現を使ってしまうという傾向が見られる。本稿では日本語学習者がなぜ敬語表現を過剰に使うのかを社会文化理論の視点から考察するものである。特に、ヴィゴツキーの発達最近接領域、レオンチェフの活動理論、バフチンの権威的対話性という三様の心的過程に注目し、敬語表現が過剰に使われる理由を提示するものである。対話というものは、ある話し手の具体的な発話が別の人の発話に出会い、互いに影響し合いながら活性化するという動的な過程としてみることができるが、日本語学習者が教師のもとで行う教室での敬語発話練習に関しては、教師が学習者の対話者であり、かつ、発話された敬語を評価する者であるという理由から、学習者は敬語をつかわなければいけないと意識するあまり、敬語を過剰に使ってしまうと論及するものである。

【キーワード】 the zone of proximal development、activity theory、intersubjectivity、authoritative dialogicality

### **1. Introduction**

One of the basic tenets of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) relies on the assumption that human mental functioning emerges in social interaction with others (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Kinginger, 2001; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Wells, 1999). Based on the sociogenetic notion of mental functioning, Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, postulated that human action and thinking are mediated by socioculturally constructed tools and signs (1978). Trying to

articulate the relationship between mental functioning and sociocultural context, Vygotsky emphasized language (a sign system) as the primary tool for mediating human action and thinking. In this Vygotskian sociogenetic perspective, language used in mediated action is considered a vehicle to generate socially conformed individual consciousness.

With this socio-genetic orientation, sociocultural studies of the human mind are integrated into the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Donato, 2000; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Lantolf, 2000). Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory holds that:

Every function in the learner's cultural development appears twice, on two levels. Some first, on the social, and later, on the psychological levels. First, between people as an interpsychological category, and then inside...as an intrapsychological category. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Citing this connection, SLA researchers started investigating second language (L2) acquisition focusing on the course of language socialization that happened in a particular sociocultural setting (Anton, 1999; Donato, 2000; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Ohta, 2001; Storch, 2002; Swain, 2000). They tried to demonstrate how individuals acquire an L2 in the Vygotskian scheme of transformation from interpsychological (between individuals) to intrapsychological (inside individuals) planes. That is to say, L2 acquisition occurs in the internalization process in which interpsychological function occurs first and intrapsychological function follows (Kozulin, 2003; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Central to this account of internalization process shifting from inter- to intrapsychological function, there are studies investigating the role of interactions in

dyads and small group work in Japanese as a second language classes (JSL) (Ohta, 2001; Mori, 2002). In association with the relationship between interactional competence in language use and the social interaction in which it occurs, it seems feasible then to integrate the sociogenetic orientation into the analysis of L2 development.

Based on the basic sociogenetic orientation that L2 acquisition is social in nature, sociocultural approaches are deployed in an attempt to illustrate the specific language behavior that Japanese honorific expressions are to be used excessively in specific social settings. There is a unique language behavior of speech communication in my JSL class that students, who are introduced to the linguistic forms of Japanese honorific expressions, tend to overuse them when they actually engage in conversation with their superior interlocutors.<sup>(1)</sup> Students are capable of using grammatically correct honorific utterances in their speech communication, but produce pragmatically inappropriate utterances by the overuse of honorific expressions. Three interrelated concepts are involved in the arguments brought up in this paper, namely (1) the zone of proximal development (ZPD), (2) activity theory, and (3) the Bakhtinian notion of hidden and authoritative dialogicality. Within this sociocultural framework of the three concepts, the aim of this article is to attempt to explain why JSL students overuse the honorific utterances in speech communication.

## **2. The Zone of Proximal Development**

One of the most commonly adopted Vygotskian sociocultural constructs in language education is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Wells,

1999). Kinginger (2002) points out that “the ZPD construct is a shorthand device capturing the emergence of cognitive development within social interaction, when participants are provided assistance from more-competent others (teachers or peers) as they engage in learning activity” (p. 240). Focusing upon the role of social interaction in JSL classes, the concept of the ZPD provides an important insight into the discussion of overly used Japanese honorific expressions. The main assumption here is that the overuse of honorific utterances occurs in the process of internalization in the ZPD constructed in JSL classes. The internalization process of acquiring honorific expressions involves a transformation shift from interpsychological to intrapsychological planes within social interaction in the ZPD, where the expert (teacher) and novice (student) conjointly engage in speech communication. The overuse of honorific utterances emerges as students engage in social interaction assisted by the morecompetent participant.

“Learning emerges as the result of interaction, but interaction within the ZPD” (Nassaji & Swain, 2000, p. 35). Based on his empirical studies of child’s cognitive development, Vygotsky stated in an attempt to illustrate the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance that :

the zone of proximal development...is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978, p. 86)

In this definition, it seems appropriate to claim that under guidance from their teacher in

JSL classes, students' honorific utterances are produced on the level of potential development through the social interaction in the ZPD.

In this sense, the ZPD is often compared with Krashen's construct, the Input Hypothesis. Gifford and Mullaney (1999) pointed out:

There are two main characteristics of the ZPD. First, the task that the student undertakes must be a little above that individual's current level of ability; it should stretch his or her capabilities, without going beyond them. In Krashen's terms, the task must be at the  $i + 1$  level. Second, there must be an adult or more skilled peer to mediate between the learner and the task or problem at hand. (p. 15)

The ZPD is a place where co-constructed language knowledge is realized. On the other hand, Krashen's  $i + 1$  model bases its conceptual affiliation on the concept of the language acquisition device (LAD) that Chomsky (1959) postulated. Both constructs assume that the attainment of potentials emerges in a joint activity undertaken by both interacting participants (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

To bring my argument to the fore, in a pedagogically constructed situation in which students visit a Japanese family, they excessively produce honorific utterances as they are instructed to introduce themselves. In this socially assembled situation where Japanese honorific expressions are to be grammatically and pragmatically used, students engage in verbal communication in response to their teacher's (Yamashita) questions:

- (1) Yamashita : Dochira kara irasshatten desu ka. (Where do you come from?)
- (2) Student : \*Kanada kara mairimashita de gozaimasu. (I come from Canada.)
- (3) Yamashita : Daigaku de nani o benkyō nasattan desu ka.

(What did you study in your university?)

(4) Student : \*Biznesu o benkyō itashimashita de gozaimasu.

(I studied business.)

Students excessively produce the honorific utterances, by adding the sentence-end “de gozaimsu.” The sentence-end word, “de gozaimasu,” is not to be used in the humble expressions when the interlocutors demonstrate their humbleness in introducing themselves to their superior members (teachers), but rather used in polite sentences when they are to make their utterances politely delivered. It is pragmatically inappropriate to construct those humble and polite expressions in one sentence at the same time. For the pedagogical purpose the teacher set up in the dyadic interaction, the students did not produce pragmatically appropriate utterances.

Donato (2004) pointed out that “the teacher’s covert goals for teacher-student collaboration create obstacles to intersubjectivity and result in interaction that focuses on making sense of the teacher’s actions and operations rather than co-constructing a meaningful communicative event” (p. 297). Intersubjectivity is the notion that separate individuals interactively share a common world in which they have potentials to know and act conjointly. Vygotsky’s concept of ZPD is grounded on this notion in relation to his sociogenetic concept of mental functioning. Within the distance delineated by the ZPD, Vygotsky believed that a learner comes to attain the potential to internalize meaning from the social interactions.

However, Vygotsky’s notion of the ZPD becomes plausible only on an assumption that a learner’s mental functioning evolves monolithically traveling from a lower to a

higher level in the cognitive distance. On this assumption, a state of intersubjectivity functions as a framework in which separate individuals act harmoniously based on their shared understanding. In the case of dyadic interaction in JSL classes, the shared understanding between teachers and students involves the pragmatically appropriate honorific utterances in speech communication. However, this orientation assumes that the shared understanding already exists in the ZPD, waiting to be achieved.

A state of intersubjectivity does not preexist in social interaction among individuals, but rather it is constructed at different levels in different moments of the interactive process. A state of intersubjectivity is time-bound and interpreted differently by individuals who participate in it. Therefore, a state of intersubjectivity does not always presuppose harmonious actions on the part of its members. The participants may resist harmonious actions by providing their own opposing ideas or simply ignoring other members' statements. In this sense, students tend to construct excessive honorific utterances disregarding the harmonious actions.

Vygotsky did not develop the concept of the ZPD through dialectical processes (Kinging, 2002, p. 245). The speech communication in JSL class sets up a common objective for its members, but each member constructs her or his own versions of intersubjectivity to interpret the common objective. Pondering over dialectical processes in the ZPD, for an explanation of why students excessively use honorific utterances, it seems possible to claim that the routes of individuals' sense-making processes are diversified and time bound. The nature and quality of interaction in this case is determined by the student's ZPD rather than by the intention of the teacher



(Nassaji & Swain, 2000).

### 3. Activity Theory

Within the realm of sociocultural orientation for language development, Leont'ev (1981) constructed the theory of activity to illuminate developmental processes of human cognition in goal-directed social activities. It is important to note that activity theory provides an understanding of the interactive process of biological and sociocultural lines of development. For example, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) state:

There are four interconnected concepts here: motives, goals, actions and operations. *Motives* can be biological, for example, needing to satisfy thirst, or they can be socioculturally constructed, for example, learning an L2 to get a job. Motives tell us why something is done. Activities are always directed at some *goals*; for example, learning to use the L2 effectively in the workplace. *Actions* are the goal-directed, concrete realizations of activities, and tell us what is done, or what course of action is followed. For example, in order to learn an L2 a learner may enroll in a language school. Finally, *operations* are the actual behaviors which accomplish the goal; i.e. specifically how it is achieved. [italics original] (p. 231)

This teleological explanation of human action provides an account of how we harmonize our perceptual development and construct logical thinking. For example, as in the dyad interaction in my JSL class, students produce their honorific utterances driven by their needs and motives to accomplish a goal. In other words, the students' mental functioning in speech production is driven by their needs and motives to accomplish a

goal. This goal-oriented activity leads to the notion that individuals go through the same mental process homogeneously to accomplish a goal together in its interactions within the sociocultural contexts in class.

However, the mechanism of cognitive development does not seem to be such a monolithic process to be explained only by the intention of achieving a goal. In JSL class, for example, the overuse of Japanese honorific utterances reveals the difference between students' intention of humbling themselves for introducing themselves in the formal situation with their superior participant (teacher) and their intention of providing the honorific utterances to receive better grades from their teacher. So students revealed their multifaceted motivations with overuse of honorifics.

#### **4. Bakhtinian notion of authoritative and hidden dialogicality**

Bakhtin (1986) tried to delineate the relationship between human mental functioning for language communication and the sociocultural context in which it occurs. Placing the analysis within the context of the role of discourse in sociocultural contexts, the notion of semiotic (sign-based) mediation was employed for transforming human consciousness by the use of sign-based vehicles (psychological tools, such as language, algebraic symbols, etc.) to construct socially shared acts. Based on his studies of semiotic mediation, Bakhtin investigated the nature of "the real unit of speech communication: the utterance" (1986, p. 71). Disregarding the analysis of sentence as an impersonalized abstract form of language, Bakhtin examined actually produced utterances in real-life conversation.

An utterance always includes the speaker's "voice" (inner speech or speech thought). Bakhtin pointed out:

Speech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects. Speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form cannot exist. (1986, p. 71)

Unlike the exclusive studies of abstracted forms of language properties, Bakhtin's linguistic analysis was focused on the speaker's voice involved in real-life speech communication.

Central to his investigation of utterance was that individual utterance inherently interacts with others, and in the mutually reflective relations, an utterance begins to carry social nature in dialogue. "The utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*" (1986, p. 92), which indicate that one's utterances are born and shaped in terms of dialogues with others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). It seems appropriate to espouse this Bakhtinian concept of dialogicality in the analysis of Japanese speech communication, since the honorific utterances are born and shaped in terms of dialogues with superiors situated in specific sociocultural contexts.

Focusing upon the role of others in dialogic interaction, Bakhtin conceptualized two different kinds of dialogicality; authoritative dialogicality and hidden dialogicality. The concept of authoritative dialogicality points out that it involves one-directional transmission of voices from more powerful to less powerful participants in speech

communication. It seems reasonable to assume that L2 teachers' voices in speech communication are transmitted as authoritative participants to their L2 learners' voices. Bakhtin said, "The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it" (1994, p. 78). By authoritative power in dialogic interaction, speakers' voices conform to the voices that are already fused in utterances. An L2 teacher's voice is then fused already in his/her students' voices when they interact with the teacher in Japanese honorific utterances.

On the other hand, the concept of hidden dialogicality is characterized by a specific situation where there is no concrete verbal response from a speech addressee. A speaker's voice is constructed in his/her utterance through dialogic interaction with his/her addressee, but in this case, the addressee's utterance is not vocalized. The speaker hears the addressee's voice as presupposed inner speech. In a chain of speech communication, hidden dialogic interaction accentuates that the addressee's voice is not actually vocalized but is heard by a speaker in his/her mind.

From the viewpoint of the two strands of dialogic constructs, it is plausible to point out that an L2 teacher's voice is transmitted to his/her students' voices in the form of authoritative and hidden dialogicality. The teacher is not only a superior interlocutor who the students are supposed to use honorific utterances with, but also their authoritative figure who encourages the use of honorific utterances in their speech communication and intervenes at the same time for checking the linguistic forms. In other words, the teacher's voice, embedded in actual utterances, is heard by students and

associated with the powerful overtones of authoritative messages. Furthermore, the authoritative voice is not practically vocalized in the chain of speech communication, only accomplishing the function of leaving the authoritative messages in the process of hidden dialogicality.

To provide an insight into the reason why L2 students tend to overuse honorific expressions, it seems important to clarify the interrelationship between speech production and authoritative and hidden dialogicality in a chain of speech communication. That is to say that, students tend to overuse the honorific utterances by listening to the hidden voices from their teacher, who constantly encourages using honorifics but at the same time provides instructional intervention for pedagogical purposes. In other words, the students try not to underuse the honorific expressions in response to the hidden voices heard from the teacher. The reason why students tend to overuse honorific utterances, therefore, resides in the fact that they listen to their teacher's voices in the process of authoritative and hidden dialogicality and try to respond to the pedagogical encouragement of using the honorific expressions.

## **5. Conclusion**

The sociogenetic concept that human action and thinking are mediated by socioculturally constructed tools and signs provides meaningful insights into the understanding of human action. In this sense, the increasing attention has been given to SCT for L2 acquisition in SLA studies. Here in this article, three interconnected concepts, ZPD, activity theory, and authoritative and hidden dialogicality, become a

focal point for explaining why students excessively construct honorific utterances. Disregarding monolithic development in the intersubjectivity of the ZPD, the dialectical relationship between students and their teacher seems to engender the overuse of honorific utterances on the pedagogical plane. The duality of motives in activity theory illustrates that students construct honorific utterances both for humbling themselves in their dialogical sense and for demonstrating the utterances to obtain better grades. Against this backdrop, it is the discrepancy between the two motives that characterize the overuse of the honorific utterances. In addition, it is claimed that the teacher's voices are embedded in the speech communication, so that students tend to construct honorific utterances excessively.

From the sociocultural point of view, speech production is considered as mediated action that the cultural tool (language) uses to regulate human mental functioning in social interaction. It is clear that the sociocultural perspective provides two sets of processes of meaning-making in the social interaction, "amplifier" and "constraint." For example, the studies of joint problem solving between teacher and students are integrated into the studies of speech production for facilitating honorific utterances as "amplifier." At the same time, the studies become a key point to explain the problem of excessively used honorific utterances as "constraint."

#### **Note**

- (1) The dyadic interview models were conjointly constructed by the teachers who taught the level-3 students of spoken Japanese at Kansai Gaidai University in 2006.

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